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ABSTRACT

A study investigated differences in self-disclosure, comparing patterns in Americans versus Chinese. Subjects, 198 American college students and 146 Chinese (Taiwan) students studying in the United States, completed a 200-item self-disclosure chart to target persons on special topics. Results of t-tests and analysis of variance indicated that American subjects disclosed more than did Chinese subjects on different conversational topics (opinion, interests, work, financial issues, personality, and body) and to different target persons (including parents, strangers, acquaintances, and intimate friends); and that significant differences regarding disclosure existed between American males and females regarding disclosure to acquaintance males, and between Chinese males and females regarding disclosure to intimate female friends. (Four tables of data are included; 47 references are attached.) (Author/RS)

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Differences in Self-Disclosure Patterns Among
Americans versus Chinese: A Comparative Study

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Abstract

The study investigated differences in self-disclosure, comparing patterns in Americans versus Chinese. One hundred and ninety eight American students and 146 Chinese students completed a 200-item self-disclosure chart to target persons on special topics. The results of t-tests and ANOVA showed that American subjects disclosed more than did Chinese subjects on different conversational topics and to different target persons. Sex differences in self-disclosure were also examined.

Differences in Self-Disclosure Patterns Among Americans versus Chinese: A Comparative Study

Communication scholars have become increasingly interested in studying the nature of dyadic interaction from the perspective of intercultural communication. An area which has received gradual attention is self-disclosure. This study extends this research by examining differences in self-disclosure, comparing patterns among Americans versus Chinese. This study compares the two cultures on the content and amount of self-disclosure to selected target persons.

Self-disclosure may be defined as "the process of making the self known to other person" (Jourard & Lasakow, 1958, p. 91). The process of self-disclosure is considered "the process of communication through self-disclosive messages" (Wheeless & Grotz, 1976). Target persons in this study refer to those individuals who receive the information about the self. Therefore, target persons may include parents, friends, acquaintances, strangers and so on.

The comparative study of self-disclosure patterns among different cultures has gradually gained popularity lately in the field of intercultural communication. It is assumed that, through the knowledge of self-disclosure patterns, people from different cultures can better understand each other in the process of communication. More research on this line becomes necessary.

The Study of Self-Disclosure

Four approaches of the study of self-disclosure have been identified (Tardy, 1988). The first approach treats self-disclosure as an individual trait. This research line mainly focuses on sex differences in self-disclosure. For example, Jourard (1971) and Jourard and Lasakow (1958) reported that females disclose more than males. Petronio, Martin, and Littlefield (1984) found that men find sender and receiver characteristics less important as prerequisite conditions for self-disclosure than do women. Cline (1986), Snell, Miller, and Belk (1989), and Wheelless, Zakahi, and Chan (1988), as well, reported that differences exist between males and females in self-disclosure.

In addition to sex differences, cultural and national influences on self-disclosure have been investigated. Kurt Lewin (1948) first compared Americans and Germans on the degree of openness to strangers. Jourard (1958) indicated that the whites disclosed more than blacks in the United States. Barnlund (1975, 1989) and Nakanishi (1986) found that American and Japanese people showed very different self-disclosure patterns to target persons. Chen (1991) also reported differences in self-disclosure between Asians and Americans.

The second approach to the study of self-disclosure concerns personal relationship rather than individuals. Researchers adopting this approach explore the interconnections between the amount and depth of self-disclosure among people involved in relationships rather than the enduring characteristic of separate

individuals (Tardy, 1988). For instance, Wheelless (1978) and Wheelless and Grotz (1977) examined the relationship between self-disclosure and trust. Altman and Taylor (1973) found self-disclosure is one of the key elements necessary to build intimate relationship. Archer and Burleson (1980) and Cozby (1972) indicated the relationship between self-disclosure and interpersonal attraction. Most of the studies in this approach examine general patterns of self-disclosure pointing to the target persons.

The third approach treats self-disclosure as a characteristic of observable messages. This approach suggests that some messages might unveil personal information, while others might not. Studies from this perspective usually investigate different aspects of self-disclosing messages, including message content and sequencing (Tardy, 1988). For instance, in an examination of combined consequences of topic- and self-disclosure reciprocity, Hoseman (1987) found that messages reciprocating both topic and intimacy were more positively evaluated than messages reciprocating only topic or intimacy.

The final approach attempts to identify the dimensions of self-disclosure. For example, Jourard and Laskow's (1958) study focused only on the amount of self-disclosure. Altman and Taylor's (1973) social penetration model distinguished amount and depth as the two facets of self-disclosure. Other scholars investigated the positive and negative aspects of self-disclosure (e.g., Gilbert & Hornsten, 1975; Gilbert & Whitneck, 1976).

Lastly, Wheelless and Grotz (1976) and Wheelless (1978) identified five dimensions of self-disclosure including intent, amount, depth, positiveness, and honesty/accuracy. All these approaches to the study of self-disclosure are subjected to the influence of culture, and may show diverse results in different cultures. Therefore, it is necessary to discuss the relationship between self-disclosure and culture.

Self-Disclosure and Culture

Reciprocal causality between culture and communication may lead to the different patterns of self-disclosure in different cultural contexts (Nakanishi, 1987). Culture not only conditions perceptions of reality, it also programs our language patterns. What, where and how we should talk is regulated by culture (Becker, 1986; Oliver, 1962; Zimbardo, 1977). In other words, culture is necessarily manifested in a person's communication pattern. This further indicates that communication is a product of culture, and culture is also the product of communication. Thus, culture is an influence which contributes to self-disclosure.

Studies of relationships between culture and self-disclosure report different amounts of self-disclosure within cultures. Lewin (1948) found Germans disclose themselves less than Americans. Jourard and Lasakow (1958) found the total disclosure of American whites was significantly higher than blacks. Barnlund's (1975, 1989) studies showed as well that Americans substantially reveal more information than Japanese on different

topics (e.g., physical appearance, sexual adequacy, financial affairs, and personal traits) and to different target persons.

Levels of self-disclosure also differ among cultures. For example, Wheelless, Erickson, and Behrens (1986) indicated that a greater depth of self-disclosure was associated with subjects of non-Western cultural origins, and greater amounts of self-disclosure were associated with American subjects. Furthermore, less depth, greater amount, less internal control locus, and more positively intended disclosiveness are associated with American subjects rather than non-Western subjects.

In addition, Nakanishi's (1987) study on perceptions of self-disclosure in initial interaction among Japanese samples illustrated that Japanese samples, compared to Americans, generally show a high reluctance to initiate a conversation with strangers. Further, Japanese respondents generally rated a low level of self-disclosure positively, and, in contrast to sex differences of self-disclosure for Americans, the Japanese females felt more comfortable in the low-disclosure conversation than did the Japanese males.

Similarly, Chinese subjects felt more constraints on their behavior in the low-disclosure conversation than did the American subjects, but in the same condition, the behavior of Chinese subjects showed more functional autonomy (Wolfson & Pearce, 1983). Moreover, the linkage of their behaviors and subsequent definitions of the relationship with target persons were reported by Chinese subjects as weaker than did American subjects in both

high and low disclosure situations. Finally, Gudykunst and Nishida (1984) reported that Americans showed higher levels of self-disclosure than did the Japanese. This is consistent with Ogawa's (1979) findings that Asian Americans were more hesitant to express themselves verbally and show more self-restraint in interaction.

American and Chinese Cultural Patterns

Abundant evidence has shown that the differences between Eastern and Western cultural patterns lead to different communication patterns between the two groups of people. It is necessary to describe some characteristics of American and Chinese cultures in order to investigate differences in self-disclosure patterns between the two groups.

The individualism-collectivism dimension of culture can be used to understand the differences in communication styles between Americans and Chinese. According to Hofstede (1980), American culture is individual-oriented, and Chinese culture is collective-oriented. Individualistic cultures show a tendency for members to be more concerned with the consequences of one's behaviors to one's own interests, needs, and goals (Hui & Triandis, 1986; Triandis, 1986; Triandis, Brislin, & Hui, 1988). In other words, individualistic cultures consider "I" identity the prime focus, and emphasize "individual goals over group goals, individualistic concerns over group concerns, and individual rights and needs over collective responsibilities and obligations (Ting-Toomey, 1988, p. 224). In contrast, members of

collectivistic cultures are more willing to sacrifice personal interests, needs, and goals for the group purpose.

Collectivistic cultures value "interdependence, reciprocal obligation, and positive-face need" (Ting-Toomey, 1988, p. 224).

The individualism-collectivism dimension of culture can be complemented by Hall's (1976) classification of high-context and low-context cultures. According to Hall, people of high-context (e.g., China) and low-context (e.g., the United States) cultures show significantly different communication styles. Ting-Toomey (1988) summarized the characteristics of low-context culture as valuing "individual value orientation, line logic, direct verbal interaction, and individualistic nonverbal style," and the high-context culture valuing "group value orientation, spiral logic, indirect verbal interaction, and contextual nonverbal style" (p. 225). Therefore, individualistic culture is associated with low-context culture, and collectivistic culture is associated with high-context culture.

The differences in communication styles between Americans and Chinese, based on the classification of individualism-collectivism and high-low context cultures have been supported by many studies. Becker (1986) examined three areas of oriental culture including social history, linguistic features, and philosophy and religion. He concluded that the Chinese people reject debate and argumentation in the process of communication. Yum (1988) examined the impact of Confucianism on communication patterns in East Asia and found that Chinese

emphasize process orientation, differentiated linguistic codes, indirect communication, and receiver-centered communication, as opposed to Northern American patterns of communication which emphasize outcome orientation, less-differentiated linguistic codes, direct communication, and sender-centered communication. In addition, Leung's (1987) study compared communication behaviors of Chinese and Americans. Chinese subjects showed much higher preference of bargaining and mediation than did American subjects in the conflict situations.

All these studies confirm the differences in communication patterns between Americans and Chinese. From the foregoing overview, it may be concluded that Americans and Chinese would also show differences in self-disclosure.

The following research questions (RQ) were proposed for investigation:

RQ1: What differences between American and Chinese subjects, if any, will be found among categories of information about self-disclosure (i.e., opinion, interests, work, financial, personality, and body)?

RQ2: Are there differences between American and Chinese subjects in the extent to which they disclose themselves to different target-persons (i.e., parents, strangers, acquaintances, and intimate friends)?

RQ3: Are there differences in self-disclosure according to gender in the subjects examined?

Methods

Respondents and Procedures

Respondents include 198 American students (92 males, 105 females) and 146 Chinese students (83 males, 55 females) studying in the northeastern universities of the United States. All the Chinese respondents were Chinese natives from Taiwan who have lived in the United States from one month to four years. Nine students did not report their gender. Self-reported data were reported for all participants who completed fully the questionnaires used in the study.

Measurement

A revised version of Self-Disclosure Scale developed by Barnlund (1975), which originated from Jourard and Lasakow's (1958) study, was used in this study. A 200-item chart of self-disclosure to target persons on special topics was devised. Target persons in this study include parents, strangers, acquaintances, and intimate friends. The category of parents was further separated into father and mother. Other categories were separated into male and female.

Six categories comprise the topics of conversation: opinion, interests, work, financial issues, personality, and body. The opinion category includes five issues: politics, religion, education, social problems, and world affairs. The interests category includes five issues: food, sport, music, reading, and television. The work category includes three issues: ambition, academic life, and incompetency. The financial category includes four issues: income, expenditure, saving, and debt. The

personality category includes five issues: self-concept, pride, shame, special asset, and weakness. Finally, the body category includes three issues: ideal appearance, health, and sexual life.

In order to measure the depth of self-disclosure, respondents were asked to indicate the degree of willingness, using the seven-item Likert scale. Respondents marked a scale from 1 to 7 - 7, representing "very much," 1, representing "not at all," and 4, representing "neutral" - to determine how much they like to talk about different topics to target persons. To avoid the confusion of meanings, the twenty-five issues under topical categories were translated into the Chinese language for the Chinese subjects. The coefficient alphas for the overall scale in this study was .98. The coefficient alphas for the four categories of target persons were .97 for parents, .98 for strangers, .96 for acquaintances, and .97 for intimate friends. Thus, the scales were considered highly reliable in this study.

Results

In order to answer research questions 1 and 2 about differences in topics and targets for self-disclosure, t-tests were conducted to analyze the self-disclosure scores between American and Chinese subjects. American subjects consistently showed higher levels of self-disclosure than did Chinese on opinions (Americans = 4.82, Chinese = 3.16), interests (Americans = 4.82, Chinese = 3.57), work (Americans = 4.44, Chinese = 3.24),

financial issues (Americans = 3.77, Chinese = 2.80), personality (Americans = 3.84, Chinese = 3.22), and on body (Americans = 4.39, Chinese = 3.17) (see Table 1).

Insert Table 1 About Here

American subjects showed substantially higher scores than did the Chinese subjects on parents (Americans = 5.21, Chinese = 4.12), strangers (Americans = 3.03, Chinese = 1.76), acquaintances (Americans = 3.77, Chinese = 2.71), and intimate friends (Americans = 5.51, Chinese = 4.27) (see Table 2). The results also show an increment in self-disclosure from the level of strangers to acquaintances to intimate friends.

Insert Table 2 About Here

One-way analyses of variance were computed to examine the research question 3 about sex differences for subjects in self-disclosure. The results are reported in Table 3. The results show that significant differences exist between Chinese males (CM) and females (CF) and American males (AM) and females (AF) on disclosing opinions (CM = 3.62, CF = 3.56, AM = 4.86, AF = 4.77), interests (CM = 3.59, CF = 3.91, AM = 5.25, AF = 5.34), Work (CM = 3.17, CF = 3.41, AM = 4.40, AF = 4.45), financial issues (CM = 2.78, CF = 2.91, AM = 3.92, AF = 3.62), personality (CM = 3.20, CF = 3.31, AM = 3.81, AF = 3.84), and on body (CM =

2.69, CF = 2.78, AM = 3.86, AF = 3.59). No significant differences were found between American males and females, and between Chinese males and females on all the topics.

Insert Table 3 About Here

The degree of self-disclosure to target persons on sex differences is shown in Table 4. The results indicate that significant differences exist between Chinese males (CM) and females (CF) and American males (AM) and females (AF) on disclosing to parents (CM = 4.17, CF = 4.15, AM = 5.20, AF = 5.20), to strangers (CM = 1.74, CF = 1.81, AM = 3.16, AF = 2.89), to acquaintances (CM = 2.72, CF = 2.73, AM = 3.93, AF = 3.62), and to intimate friends (CM = 4.13, CF = 4.54, AM = 5.37, AF = 5.59). Significant differences were also found between American males and females on disclosing to acquaintance males (AM = 3.96, AF = 3.62), and between Chinese males and females on disclosing to intimate female friends (CM = 3.96, CF = 4.68). No significant differences were found between American males and females, and between Chinese males and females on disclosing to other target persons.

Insert Table 4 About Here

Discussion

The overall findings of this study suggest that there are

significant differences in verbal styles between Americans and Chinese. American subjects significantly showed higher scores on six conversational topics including opinion, interests, work, financial issues, personality, and body than did the Chinese subjects. American subjects, as well, significantly showed higher scores on target persons including parents, strangers, acquaintances, and intimate friends than did the Chinese subjects.

Sex differences were also investigated in this study. The findings generally indicate that significant differences exist between males and females of American subjects and males and females of Chinese subjects. In addition to the significant differences between American males and females in regard to disclosure to acquaintance males, and significant differences between Chinese males and females in regard to disclosure to intimate female friends, no significant difference was found between American males and female, and between Chinese males and females on other conversational topics and target persons. Future research might examine why the differences were only shown in the two categories between males and females in the two cultures.

The differences of self-disclosure between subjects of the two cultures may be contributed to the consequence of cultural values. What has been discussed previously on the value discrepancies of individualism-collectivism and low-high context cultures is an explanation. Traditionally, to Chinese, speech is

considered not an effective way of communication. It is the "act," based on sincerity of mind, which accounts for the development of interpersonal relationship. Articulation and talkativeness through the means of words are not valued in the Chinese society. Eloquent persons are considered to be less knowledgeable and even dangerous. Sayings like "The superior man acts before he speaks, and afterwards speaks according to his actions," and "The superior man seeks to be slow of speech but quick of action" from Confucius, "Much talking will lead to a dead end," and "He who knows does not speak, he who speaks does not know" from Lao Tze, and "Words are the ladders leading to disorder," and "He who uses few words is rewarded with good fortune" from Yi Ching are some typical examples to discourage the use of speech in human interaction.

Speech, in contrast, is regarded by Americans as the principal vehicle for exchanging personal experiences and for the achievement of interpersonal relationship. In the Western cultures speech is a form that "is seen not only as the species differentiating potential of human beings, but the source of their greatest accomplishment as well," and "the social system rests upon a deep commitment to discussion as the primary mode of inquiry, of learning, of negotiation, and of decision making" (Barlund, 1975, p. 89).

The differences of verbal styles between Americans and Chinese found in this study also support Nakanishi's (1987) assertion that culture and communication are reciprocally causal. This

further demonstrates that "culture-general" approach for the study of intercultural communication is not promising. According to Shuter (1987, 1990), the present research in the field of intercultural communication lacks region and culture specific studies. Intercultural communication scholars pay too much attention to communication process while ignoring the concept of culture itself. For future research it is necessary for communication scholars to investigate the specific ways that culture affects the communication process in different societies.

The findings of this study confirm the cross-cultural validity of Altman and Taylor's (1973) social penetration theory. According to Altman and Taylor, self-disclosure increases in different levels of relationships. The results of this study indicate that subjects of the two cultures show less amount of disclosure to strangers, and more to acquaintances, and most to intimate friends.

Finally, future research may further explore why differences of disclosure only exist on acquaintance males to American males and females, and on intimate female friends to Chinese males and females. Moreover, future research may also investigate if there are sex differences on different conventional topics to different target persons.

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Table 1
Average Disclosure on Different Topics

Topics	Americans	Chinese	t Value	Prob.
	MN/SD	MN/SD		
Overall	4.39/.73	3.16/.62	14.20	.001
Opinions	4.82/.97	3.57/.87	11.89	.001
Interests	5.30/1.04	3.70/.99	13.86	.001
Work	4.44/.83	3.24/.83	12.58	.001
Financial	3.77/.93	2.80/.78	9.90	.001
Personality	3.84/.89	3.22/.85	6.08	.001
Body	4.39/.73	3.17/.62	14.20	.001

Note. N = 344.

Table 2
Average Disclosure to Target Persons

Target Persons	Americans	Chinese	t Value	Prob.
	MN/SD	MN/SD		
Parents	5.21/1.08	4.12/1.07	8.55	.001
Father	5.05/1.27	4.10/1.12	6.91	.001
Mother	5.33/1.05	4.13/1.14	9.52	.001
Strangers	3.03/0.98	1.76/0.75	12.86	.001
Stranger M.	3.04/0.97	1.79/0.77	12.64	.001
Stranger F.	3.02/0.98	1.75/0.74	13.03	.001
Acquaintances	3.77/0.87	2.71/0.78	10.92	.001
Acquaintance M.	3.78/0.89	2.79/0.78	10.20	.001
Acquaintance F.	3.77/0.87	2.64/0.80	11.62	.001
Intimate friends	5.51/0.84	4.27/1.05	10.78	.001
Intimate M.	5.45/0.91	4.37/1.10	8.99	.001
Intimate F.	5.53/0.88	4.22/1.12	11.11	.001

Note. N = 344.

Table 3
Analysis of Variance of Topical Disclosure
on Sex Differences

Topics	Group	MN	SD	df	F-Value	Prob.
Overall	AM	4.44	0.76	3/303	61.37	.001
	AF	4.35	0.71			
	CM	3.17	0.50			
	CF	3.22	0.72			
Opinions	AM	4.86	1.00	3/300	42.29	.001
	AF	4.77	0.94			
	CM	3.62	0.75			
	CF	3.56	1.00			
Interests	AM	5.25	1.02	3/306	62.29	.001
	AF	5.34	1.07			
	CM	3.59	0.93			
	CF	3.91	1.03			
Work	AM	4.40	0.87	3/305	49.82	.001
	AF	4.45	0.81			
	CM	3.17	0.70			
	CF	3.41	0.96			
Financial	AM	3.92	1.03	3/301	30.51	.001
	AF	3.62	0.84			
	CM	2.78	0.63			
	CF	2.91	0.92			
Personality	AM	3.81	0.90	3/289	10.96	.001
	AF	3.84	0.89			
	CM	3.20	0.63			
	CF	3.31	1.12			
Body	AM	3.86	0.88	3/295	33.49	.001
	AF	3.59	0.86			
	CM	2.69	0.80			
	CF	2.78	0.98			

Note. The larger the mean values, the more self-disclosure.
AM = American Males, AF = American Females, CM = Chinese
Males, CF = Chinese Females.

Table 4
Analysis of Variance of Disclosure to Target Persons
on Sex Differences

Target	Group	MN	SD	df	F-Value	Prob.
Parents	AM	5.20	0.98	3/290	21.68	.001
	AF	5.20	1.19			
	CM	4.17	1.08			
	CF	4.15	1.00			
Father	AM	5.11	1.13	3/299	14.31	.001
	AF	5.00	1.38			
	CM	4.21	1.15			
	CF	4.04	1.02			
Mother	AM	5.26	0.90	3/306	28.30	.001
	AF	5.37	1.19			
	CM	4.11	1.07			
	CF	4.26	1.20			
Strangers	AM	3.16	1.02	3/298	49.64	.001
	AF	2.89	0.93			
	CM	1.74	0.70			
	CF	1.81	0.83			
Stranger M.	AM	3.12	1.02	3/303	48.94	.001
	AF	2.89	0.92			
	CM	1.79	0.74			
	CF	1.79	0.82			
Stranger F.	AM	3.14	1.02	3/305	50.46	.001
	AF	2.88	0.92			
	CM	1.72	0.69			
	CF	1.81	0.84			
Acquaintances	AM	3.93	0.86	3/286	39.17	.001
	AF	3.62	0.87			
	CM	2.72	0.71			
	CF	2.73	0.87			
Acquaintance M.	AM	3.96	0.88	3/293	35.08	.001
	AF	3.61	0.87			
	CM	2.85	0.72			
	CF	2.73	0.86			
Acquaintance F.	AM	3.89	0.86	3/296	43.37	.001
	AF	3.65	0.87			
	CM	2.60	0.75			
	CF	2.73	0.89			

Intimate Friends	AM	5.37	0.81	3/281	41.73	.001
	AF	5.59	0.86			
	CM	4.13	0.96			
	CF	4.54	1.08			
Intimate M.	AM	5.29	0.88	3/286	28.23	.001
	AF	5.57	0.91			
	CM	4.40	1.06			
	CF	4.40	1.09			
Intimate F.	AM	5.41	0.83	3/301	50.44	.001
	AF	5.61	0.91			
	CM	3.96	1.01			
	CF	4.68	1.14			

Note. The larger the mean values, the more of self-disclosure.
 AM = American Males, AF = American Females, CM = Chinese
 Males, CF = Chinese Females.